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THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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Considerable interest is manifested of late, especially in the West, as to what is the best content of courses to be offered in history, civics, and economics. Ever since the report of the Committee of Seven on the teaching of history was promulgated, there has been a decided tendency to put its recommendations to the test, and as a result the history work in high schools has come to have a certain uniformity of type as to content, based upon these recommendations. Just at present, however, there is a restlessness along certain lines. There are those who feel that not enough time is found under the present plan for the application of the more practical phases of the social sciences, as in the teaching of civics and economics.

To an observer who is not a specialist in this particular department, but rather interested in the broader problems of the curriculum of secondary schools, the disappointment as to results seems due rather to the failure to accomplish that part of the work assigned to the elementary school, than to any inherent weakness in the work suggested for the high school.

There is a certain amount of concrete, basic study of institutional life which naturally belongs to the elementary period of instruction; but as the majority of our elementary schools are now organized, this work is impracticable. The failure of its accomplishment destroys the natural order of development, and throws upon the high school the necessity of dwelling too long upon rudimentary principles to be able to accomplish with any degree of satisfaction the work contemplated by the report of the committee.

At two rather important meetings in Illinois the past month—the Schoolmasters' Club and the High School Conference of the State University—considerable emphasis was given to discussion in favor of more formal teaching of economics and civics in high schools. Now, it seems to the writer that, while there are certain very good grounds

for such an argument, there is a better and more logical method of attaining what seems to be the desired result from our teaching of the social sciences.

There are a number of subjects, partly secondary and partly collegiate, which we may call phases of the philosophy of history, or art in history. Among these are literature, the science of government, economic doctrines, industrial development, various social problems.

Now, these subjects all take their significance chiefly from their historic background, and their rudiments are therefore to be found in a study of history. To attempt to teach them without a fair knowledge of the historic groundwork is an illogical and somewhat dangerous procedure. It exposes the student to the possibility of inheriting from his school training the same weakness which would result from so-called scientific reasoning without sufficient or accurate data. He would have the form without the substance.

For this reason the safer plan would seem to be to keep constantly before the student the historic groundwork. Probably no better field of historic work can be found for such a purpose than three courses of a year each in ancient, English, and American history.

I am not unaware of the argument favoring the shortening of the ancient history to a half-year. This is simply an effort to gain time for instruction in the various social and economic deductions from history. But if there is any good ground for what has been said in favor of history as the basis of such studies, this argument is not well grounded.

In the first place, the ancient nations—Greece and Rome, for instance—are the only historic nations whose cycles stand completely in perspective. Their theories of government, their social conditions, their industrial systems, stand complete, both as cause and effect, so far as the life-history of these nations is concerned. They have also an art and literature and philosophy which are too fundamentally related to our present to be passed lightly by.

To give less than a year each to English and American history is to confine these practically to mere skeleton outlines, with scant opportunity of tracing the relation of historic movement to the development of a nation's laws, social life, art, and philosophy.

I know the argument is that such a dependence upon history leads

to a lack of definiteness in the training of the youth along the more practical lines, as it is put. This is assuming, of course, that there is no other remedy for such a lack of definiteness than the use of regular, distinct textbook courses in literary history, civics, economics, etc. This, however, is purely a habit of thought.

It is quite as feasible a plan—and much more logical, as I see it—to dissect out regular courses along these and other practical lines. I mean a regularly prepared, printed outline course, with its proper historic setting preserved. Such a course in economics, for instance, might run through the entire three years of study. This might also be true of literature. Civics, while necessarily confined mostly to the United States, might well have a beginning in connection with English history. These dissected-out courses, carried along parallel with the general historic study, and supported by numerous handbooks and source material in the reference library, would form a chain of continuity in the historic teaching of our schools, and would thus strengthen the influence of its lessons as well as the validity of the student's deductions.

Such an outline course, with references, would be to the text in history what the laboratory manual is to physics or chemistry. It would furnish sufficient opportunity for the application of a historic principle to fix the significance indelibly in the learner's mind.

A course thus pursued in the history of English literature, for instance, would economize time, and would also give to the student that knowledge of historic factors in the development of literary types which is so often entirely lacking in students who have had the history of literature without the English history.